DALIT AESTHETICS: A STUDY OF BHAKTI PERIOD

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'Dalit aesthetics', from an unabashedly brahaminical position, might appear an oxymoron in itself for the simple reason that 'aesthetics' as such is believed to be the sole preserve of the twice-born. The presumption is that dalits being low-caste are uncivilized enough to have any sense of aesthetics. The present paper not only uncovers the politics of aesthetics, it also makes an effort to analyse the shifting perspectives of dalit aesthetics. In this process, the myth that dalit ideology and aesthetics, with whatever be its type and level of maturity, is frozen in time would also stand thoroughly examined, contested and eventually overturned. The paper focuses on the role of history particularly from the time of medieval *bhakti*-movements onwards in the making of dalit consciousness and aesthetics. Different historical events, situations and turns have brought about significant changes in the growth of dalit aesthetics.

Aesthetics of Sacred Dissent

Dalit aesthetics has undergone strategic shifts since the *bhakti*-period when for the first time some simmerings of discontent against the brahamanical orthodoxy were articulated by 'the low-caste *bhakti* poets'. The Bhakti movement, a socio-religious expression of the revolt of the masses originated in Tamil Nadu but soon spread to Karnataka and Maharashtra, and eventually swept through the whole of north India. It is undeniable that the Bhaktas represented the aspirations of the downtrodden masses as against the interests of the twice born. *Bhakti* movement was quite paradoxical in nature in the sense that presumably it was a credo of surrender and devotion, yet it also combined a high-degree of activism. It was an enigmatic mix of surrender and protest, both. A whole range of poets spanning across entire India descended upon the literary firmament unsettling the given standards of aesthetics as well as social practices.

The beginnings of dalit literature are often located in medieval *bhakti* literature for two compelling complementary reasons. One, most of the *bhakti* saint-poets were low-caste local preachers; two, they launched a blistering attack on canonical Hindu practices. *Bhakti*

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poets from Namdev to Kabir were low-caste authors who wrote with utter disdain against the brahmanical orthodoxy. Going strictly by the definition of dalit literature, *bhakti* poets were indeed dalit poets for not only they were dalit themselves, they wrote against the excesses of upper caste Hindus. Yet they fall short of being true dalit poets. Dalit literature has to have a consciousness of radical change that too through aggressive, quasi-militant ways of protest. Since *bhakti*-poets remained very much within the domain of the sacred, they failed to carve out literature outside the literature of Hinduism. No wonder, most of the *bhakti* literature is appropriated by upper caste Hindus as their literature. Since *bhakti* saints combined apparently contradictory virtues of protest and surrender, they did not pose a real threat to the hegemony of the sacred order. These *bhakti* saints nevertheless remain a source of inspiration for anti-caste agitations and movement all over the India. Among the *bhakti* poets who inspired dalits were Ravidas, Namdev, Tukaram, Eknath, Chokhamela, Kabir and others. Their writings collectively may be described as proto-dalit.

The significant feature of *bhakti* movement was that its frontline leaders were poets, and in this sense poetical activism combined with political in a very unprecedented yet organic way. Some of the common features of bhakti movement are:

The bhakti poets always questions the orthodox and repressive brahminical understanding of Hinduism and as such made it possible for the lower castes and women to give a form to their religious aspirations, emphasizing devotion and love, not knowledge as a means of salvation. Another is acceptance of all castes and women into the fold of the saints; in some areas, the song of muslim saints are also included in the stories and the canon and the vernacular as the medium used by the *bhaktas* In Marathi and Hindi, the songs are among the first vernacular literature of the area.(Zelliot and Monash-Puneka,14).

A quick survey of some of *bhakti* poets – both Brahmins and non-Brahmins is warranted here to understand the nuances of their protest-poetics. Since these poets wrote very much within the frame of *bhakti* and devotion, their protest falls short of radical protest of utter secular nature. Let us understand the nature of protest of dalit *bhakti* poet Chokhamela first.

Chokhamela, a famous Mahar poet of the *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra around 13th century evinces a profound awareness of

his being an untouchable. He was disturbed by the fact that he was ill treated as an untouchable. For instance in the *abhanga* quoted below he resents his birth in the lower-caste thus:

> If you had to give me this birth,
> Why give me birth at all?
> You cast me away to be born; you were cruel,
> Where were you at the time of my birth?
> Who did You help then?
> Chokha says: O Lord, o Keshava, don't let me go.
> (*Abhanga* 6)
> (qtd. in Zelliot, 1992, 5)

In another *abhanga*, Chokha expresses his inability to serve the divine for he does not have access to Thee:

> O God, my caste is low;
> How can I serve you?
> Everyone tells me to go away;
> How can I see you?
> When I touch anyone, they take offence.
> Chokhamela wants your mercy. (*Abhanga,* 76)
> (qtd. in Zelliot, 1992*,* 5).

There is an unmistakable element of fatalism in Chokha as well. He seems to accept his outward ugliness thus conceding in the process a sense of superiority to the aesthetics of the upper-order:

> Cane is crooked, but its juice isn't crooked
> Why be fooled by outward appearance?
>
> The bow is crooked, but the arrow isn't crooked,
> Why be fooled by outward appearance?
>
> The river is twisting, but the water isn't crooked.
> Why be fooled by outward appearance?
> Chokha is ugly, but his feelings aren't ugly.
> Why be fooled by outward appearance? (*Abhanga* 52)
> (qtd. in Zelliot, 1992, 8) .

The spirit of most of the *abhangas*, as Zelliot puts it, "is delight in the Lord, delivery from life's sufferings through devotion. Even though agony is there, the central message is that Chokha, even though a Mahar, could experience the grace of God." (8)

In the *abhanga* quoted below, for instance, he is less critical of the excesses of Hindu orthodoxy; he is more apologetic about his own karma and birth:

Pure Chokhamela, always chanting the name.
I am a Mahar without a caste. Nila in a previous birth.
He showed disrespect to Krishna; so my birth as a mahar.
Chokh says: this impurity is the fruit of our past.
(*Abhanga* 4)
(qtd.in Zelliot, 1992, 7) .

The appeal for mercy tones down, if not totally undoes, the muted voice of protest. Instead of exhorting his fellow brethren for a radical social change, he seeks divine intervention to correct the social imbalance. The hegemony of the sacred is not threatened; rather it stands enhanced with slightly more room for the low-caste. Chokha combines piety with protest, with the latter being more pronounced. Though Chokhamela's voice is perhaps the first dalit voice in terms of interrogating the caste structure, his protest is contained in bhakti. A poet of low-caste *bhakti* poet of north India Ravidas, who is supposed to be more radical than Chokha, also succumbs to pressures of the sacred in moments of vehement protest:

Whether one's heart is Brahmin or Vaisya,
Shudra or Kshatriya,
Dom, chandal, or malech,
Through the worship of the lord, one becomes pure, and
Liberates the self and both family lines…
Just as the water plants leaf remains nectar the water
[But untouched by it],
In this way, says Ravidas,
Is the life [of the blessed] in this world?
(qtd. in Zelliot, 2005, 197)

The liberation is sought through worship, and through work, which goes against the grain of modern-day dalit radical rhetoric. Dalit emancipation is to be sought in the domain of the material, thorough the material only, the worship of the divine is the only an escapist way of emancipation. So Ravidas was one of the greatest figure of the saint movement in the medieval period. He along with Kabir, Namdev, Chokhamela formed the backbone of the medieval anti-caste movement. But unlike Kabir, who comes across as a radical and, revolutionary saint, Ravidas is more often than not projected as a devout Ram- Worshipping saint.

In his poetry, Ravidas questioned caste hegemony and valued labour of all sorts, as well as a life of simplicity and morality. He

imagined an egalitarian society where there would be no discrimination or exploitation. He called such a society Begumpura, "land without sorrow." Through his poetry he questioned established norms and hierarchies. He also initiated conversations with upper caste Hindus on questions related to caste, social justice, love and forms of worship. Though he was vehemently opposed by many for doing so, his perseverance and arguments initiated a process of pluralisation that has come into our times.

Ravidas absorbed positive influences of contemporary sects. He acknowledged Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva in his poetry as manifestations of God, but rejected celibacy, asceticism, penance, austerity, rituals, pilgrimage, idol worship and the authority of texts considered sacred. He was vocal against the *varna* (caste) system. He formed his distinct identity so his disciples came to be known Ravidas-panthis. He chose the middle path between radical separation and assimilation.

Another well-known *bhakti* poet Kabir is famous for his iconoclastic outpours. Kabir is the best- known voice for equality of caste and religions divisions in poetic, picturesque, fiercely strong terms. He questions the concept of purity so-obsessively peddled by the twice-born brahmins. He asks:

Tell me, O pandit,
what place is pure
where I can sit
and eat my meal?
(Trans., Dharwadkar, 124).

And then he goes on to enlist practically every site of life that are dismissed by the brahmins as impure:

Cowdung's impure,
The bathing-square's impure –
Its very curbs are nothing but impure.
Kabir says.
Only they are pure
who've completely cleansed
their thinking.
(Trans., Dharwadkar, 125)

Despite his formidable foregrounding social life, Kabir tends to gravitate more towards transcendence and metaphysics. The reformatory streak is overtaken by metaphysical propensities. This is how he seeks renunciation:

Kabir says, renounce
all family, caste, and clan.
Turn into an ant,
instead –
pick the sugar [Hari] from the sand
and eat .
(Trans., Dharwadkar, 120).

Eknath is a Brahmin bhakti poet yet he speaks on behalf of the Mahars; rather he takes on the Mahar voice in his dramatic poems called *bharuds*. He wrote some three hundred bharuds, of these almost "fifty were written as if an Untouchable were the author. Forty-seven bharuds seem to come from the mouths of Mahar men or women; one is written in the name of a Mang" (Zelliot, 2005, 15). Eknath brings into focus the hard-earned livelihood of Mahars:

I do more than my routine work.
I answer to anyone who comes or goes.
I guard the houses of all the villagers.
Is this hard life such a small thing,
O my masters? (Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar, 261).

The attitude, despite anger, remains that of petitioning. There is lack of will to confront the forces of oppression. The hierarchy of master-slave is not seriously threatened; rather it is accepted tamely.

Janabai another bhakti saint was the servant of Namdev who wrote in her poems Vithoba's love for all his disciples and see the way she described Chokhamela as being in Vithoba's heart.

My Vitthal has many children
With him is a merry crowd,
… Janeswar walks in front,
Beautiful Muktabai close behind,
Gora the potter rides his hip,
Chokha in his very heart… (259).

Tukaram, the most beloved saint- poet of Maharashtra, wrote hundreds of *abhangas*, many of which were anti- orthodoxy and anti-caste. Tukaram in the seventeenth century has some strong comments to make caste, specifically about Chokhamela's own caste:

He's not a Brahmin who abhors
The touch of a Mahar.
What retribution can pay?
He won't throw his life away!

A Chandala drives him wild,
It's his heart that is defiled.
Tuka says,his caste is defined
By what fills his mind.
(qtd in Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar, 26).

The legends of the saints were collected a century, even centuries, later after their lives, in all three traditions - Tamil, Marathi and Hindi- showing how closely linked were the lives of the saints with their songs and a companionship or a fellowship, is expressed often in the songs themselves. Saints of the Bhakti movement came from all castes and, the movement had a large mass support. Unfortunately it could not maintain its initial thrust and was domesticated by Hindu orthodoxy.

The Maharastrian Bhakti movement, similar to movement throughout in India, was antiorthodox, including both women and shudras, was based on the experience of God rather than on traditional piety or rituals. Its radical stance and its inclusiveness, however, were largely confined to the religious plane, and action for social equality from it was trivial. (Paswan, Sanjay and Pramanshi Jaideva, 16)

In the poetry of *bhakti* poets, the poetics of surrender ultimately eclipses the poetics of resistance. Yet the credit of inaugurating a concerted resistance against brahminical oppression goes to these poets. There resistance from a modern dalit-radical perspective might appear moderate and even compromising but given the times they were writing in, it was quite revolutionary. Displacing Hindu orthodoxy in times of medieval siege was a difficult task but their unrelenting critique did dent its hegemony.

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